

August 20, 2002

James P. Mayer, Executive Director
State of California Little Hoover Commission
925 L Street, Suite 805
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Mr. Mayer:

This letter is in response to your letter dated July 25, 2002 that requested to hear what our county has done to reform the foster care system. Sacramento County Department of Health and Human Services is pleased to have this opportunity to relate the progress it had made in reducing the number of children in our foster care system. To frame the progress that we have made, I would like to provide a historical review of events that have lead to the current situation.

In the 1970's there was public concern nationally over the growing number of children in foster care. At that time, the federal government responded by passing the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, requiring states to make "reasonable efforts" to prevent out-of-home placement and to promote family reunification or find permanent homes.

Child Welfare agencies throughout the country were hindered in implementing the 1980 legislation due to limited resources and budgets. Consequently, in the mid-1980's, there was a 74% increase nationally in the number of children in out-of-home care. Concurrently, the out-of-home care system found itself facing new challenges: children with increasingly severe emotional and behavioral problems; the pervasiveness of substance abuse and its impact on families; and the discharge of many youth from care who lacked jobs, homes and connections to a family.

Congress again took action, creating the Family Preservation and Family Support Program as part of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993. This program reiterated the principles of the 1980 legislation, including intensive family preservation services (intended to keep families together) and reunification services for families. Throughout our nation there followed an intense effort to use family preservation as the primary child welfare intervention.

In addition to being viewed as the premiere service delivery system, Family Preservation was also seen as a cost savings program. However, the program was never adequately funded. In California, the State Department of Social Services promised financial incentives for counties achieving success in implementing family preservation strategies. However, funding for the needed intensive services was never adequately appropriated and the financial incentives did not materialize as promised.

The results of the over-reliance and under-funding of family preservation started impacting our county and others throughout the nation in the mid-1990's. Tragedies of children dying while receiving family preservation services started emerging on the front pages of newspapers across the country, describing local child welfare agencies in a state of disarray or total breakdown.

In Sacramento County, several tragedies occurred that unleashed a torrent of publicity. Throughout the nation, other counties had similar experiences. Twenty-one child protection agencies across the country were placed under judicial supervision. In 1996 the Sacramento County Board of Supervisor approved a resolution that affirmed that child safety is the county's priority. In 1997, the federal government enacted the Adoption and Safe Families Act that declared child safety as the priority.

Correlated with this change in philosophy was a steady increase of children entering the foster care system. In Sacramento County the number of children in foster care doubled from 1995 through 2000. In July 2000 our county's foster care population peaked at 6,284.

To address this rapid increase in the foster care system, Sacramento County has expended enormous effort and resources to develop innovative services to assist at-risk families in providing a safe environment for children, thereby avoiding the need for foster care placements. The three primary prevention services, listed below, are programs we have in place that are strengthening families while protecting children:

1. Sienna Vista Project: provides a supportive neighborhood environment for families. The presence of a multi-disciplinary team in a very large apartment complex has produced benefits that the independent evaluator, Dr. Robert Waste, stated were the best he's seen in his 20+ years of evaluating human service programs.
2. Birth and Beyond Program: provides support for families with pregnant moms or newborns through home visitation and Family Resources Centers at nine different locations. Early results indicate that these services may be helping to break the cycle of child abuse in moms who were abused as children.

3. Nurse Family Partnership Program: provides public health nurse home visitation services to first-time high-risk mothers. A 20-year longitudinal clinical study of the program in New York showed the most dramatic improvements were in the highest risk families, including a reduced incidence of child abuse.

In addition to these prevention services Sacramento County has developed interventions that are producing results and keeping children out of the foster care system. *Attached for your review is a listing with descriptions of these interventions.* The two essential components that have contributed to the success of these programs are:

1. Lower caseloads generate successful results, and
2. Collaboration with community and fellow government agencies leverages and maximizes resources.

Since our county's foster care population peaked in July 2000, these innovative service delivery systems have contributed to reducing the number of children in our foster care system by 16%. In June 2002 we had 5281 children in our foster care system.

Many of these innovative service delivery systems do not fall within the funding mandates of Child Protective Services and must be creatively developed within allocated funds and grants. In some cases it has required reassigning some case-carrying social work staff to these intensive services with reduced caseloads, while other staff must carry a heavier load. We believe it is important to continue with these innovative and enhanced service delivery systems since they are producing results and keeping children out of the foster care system.

We have also managed to reduce the number of children in our foster care system during a time when our allocated social workers positions have increased by only 23 since fiscal year 99/00. Therefore, our county has used resources to maintain an aggressive hiring campaign that has resulted in the virtual filling of all social work positions. However, we are faced with a constant movement of staff between programs and an approximate 20% turnover rate in the programs annually. This has had the effect of reducing the number of experienced staff in any given program. Nonetheless, in aggregate, it has resulted in a significant workload reduction of individual social workers compared to the 20+% vacancy rate of years past.

It would be erroneous to assume that the influx of new staff, and the resultant reduced caseloads for individual social workers, has produced a reasonable workload for staff. With the notable exception of our staff assigned to our intensive units, caseloads remain too high. We have yet to achieve the minimal caseload standards recommended by the State's workload study produced as a result of SB 2030.

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We in Sacramento County DHHS look to the future with an eye toward truly making significant positive change for families and children. Probably the single biggest variable is the level of funding available. The State's appropriation for Child Welfare Services will determine if we can continue with the innovative services we have in place.

Regrettably, achieving the funding levels necessary to provide adequate prevention and early intervention services exceeds the State and counties' capacity. A solution to the dilemma is through federal law changes or funding waivers that could provide the resources with little, if any, increase in cost. If states and counties were able to utilize foster care funds for those "front end" services, the number of children now requiring foster care could be reduced.

The logic for the "front end" use of foster care funds is irrefutable. If CPS is compelled to intervene in even one family and places three children in foster care, at the fiscal year 2000/2001 average cost of \$1,735 per month per child, the cost is \$5,205 per month or \$63,460 annually. That could buy a lot of prevention or early intervention services. It is my hope that the California Department of Social Services will pursue this issue.

Thank you for this opportunity to express our comments on this critically important subject. If you have questions regarding any of the information that has been provided, please contact my office.

Sincerely,

Jim Hunt, Director
Department of Health and Human Services.

Attachment

C: The Honorable Deborah Ortiz, Senator, California State Senate
 The Honorable Darrell Steinberg, Assemblyman, California State Assembly
 The Honorable Anthony Pescetti, Assemblyman, California State Assembly
 Rita Saenz, Director, California Department of Social Services
 Frank Mecca, Executive Director, California Welfare Directors Association